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HEADLINE: S. Korean Isle On War Footing;  
Fortress-Like Exclave Lies Close to Foe's Shore

BYLINE: Peter Maass, Special to The Washington Post

DATELINE: PAENGYONG ISLAND, South Korea

BODY:

This rugged island is like a floating fortress, anchored behind enemy lines.

A geopolitical oddity, the high-security island lies just a few miles off the North Korean mainland, 30 minutes away by boat, but belongs to South Korea, a 10-hour boat ride away. On a clear day, North Korea is easily visible across a narrow strait.

"The soldiers and civilians on this island live under the heavy tension of the North Korean Army," said a top military officer, speaking to the first group of foreign journalists to visit this restricted island since the Korean War.

A symbol of the intense rivalry between the two sides, Paengnyong is a place where the Korean War never really ended. Thirty-five years after the conflict was brought to a close without a formal treaty, a curfew remains in place here and the sandy beaches are off limits to civilians, ringed with coils of nasty-looking barbed wire. The island bristles with soldiers and military installations, from camouflaged observation posts dug into hillsides to sophisticated radar surveillance stations atop mountains.

"Do you feel the atmosphere of war here?" an earnest Navy officer asked, with a touch of pride in his voice.

South Korean officials point to places like Paengnyong when they feel a need to justify the repression of civil liberties since 1953. The argument is straightforward: the military threat from the North requires a firm, sometimes ruthless hand in domestic politics. Dissent, the reasoning goes, is a luxury that the South cannot afford.

But with the country going through its first free election campaign in decades, the opposition is challenging the government's human rights record and its policy toward North Korea. The trip to Paengnyong for foreign journalists appeared aimed in part at highlighting the northern threat in order to justify the government's past policies.

About 6,500 civilians live on the island, many of them refugees who fled North Korea during the war.

To many of South Korea's 40 million citizens, the threat from North Korea today is as real as the civil war that brought so much death and suffering

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to the country. One top military officer, asked about his memories of the war, which ended when he was 13, replied in his broken English, "Bad time. Very cold. Very hungry."

Those dark memories and deep-seated anticommunism were echoed by a middle-aged man in Du Moon Jin, a fishing village nestled beside a small harbor on the island. "We don't want communists here," he said, speaking through an interpreter. As several other villagers looked on, the man added: "The North Koreans will not attack Paengnyong because we are united and will fight the communists."

Local military officials recount the fate of five villagers who became martyrs. Their fishing boat allegedly was attacked by a North Korean Navy vessel in 1970. Instead of surrendering, the story goes, four of the islanders are said to have made suicidal jumps into the icy waters, a fifth was shot. A sixth was captured and later released. A marble memorial to the men stands next to the barbed-wire fence that runs between the village and the beach.

A Seoul government press release given to journalists said that North Korean "provocations" in the straits between the mainland and Paengnyong forced the island's fishermen to abandon their trade in the early 1970s. But the large number of fishing boats bobbing in the island harbors told a different story. Local officials said nearly 50 percent of the islanders are fishermen.

According to local military officials, a midnight curfew empties the streets so that any North Korean spy infiltrated onto the island can be identified. Military officials admit that they have not found any spies in recent memory, but they insist that the island's exceptional security has kept away the North Koreans.

For many of the sentries at military observation posts, the visit of foreigners seemed to be a welcome break from the tedium of looking out over a desolate stretch of water. They assumed whatever poses the photographers and film crews requested. They crouched in front of their machine guns as if firing at a phantom enemy. They scowled in the direction of North Korea. Then they lounged around when the lens caps were put back on the cameras.

Still, even the sight of North Korean jets can apparently wreak psychological havoc on some of the islanders. According to the Navy officer, after two North Korean fighter jets buzzed Paengnyong a few years ago, hundreds of islanders took the next boat to Inchon, the nearest South Korean port. They feared the outbreak of another war with North Korea.

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